



GENDER BIAS IN EDUCATION: PERCEPTIONS OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

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ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, increasing numbers of girls and women are moving into intellectual and occupational spheres traditionally seen to be masculine (Francis 2000). These changes involve the performance of new forms of femininity, a distancing from variants traditionally perceived as normative and the adoption of qualities previously viewed as masculine. Yet this new reinvented femininity is just as regulated as previous forms of femininity. Girls and women are clearly paying a price for their success, as women develop illnesses of stress previously only seen in men, and various obsessive-compulsive disorders continue to grow among female students (Walkerdine et al. 2001). The downside of female 'success' is apparent in the double and sometimes triple shift of many female academicians juggling work, child care and further study, while younger female students are caught up in a different juggling act between high academic achievements and positioning themselves as attractive and desirable to male peers. This paper remains a humble attempt at exploring the reason behind a colossal loss of valuable national intellectual resources in the higher education sector and suggest a new perspective with the prevalent social system in mind.

KEY WORDS: Academician, higher education, gender, society.

The contemporary times exhibit a concern with changing perception of gender with gender roles being increasingly questioned, new gender profiles emerging and gaining official recognition. A section of society also claims that milestones have been reached regarding women empowerment. This concern has successfully eluded in-depth scrutiny of what is happening to girls and women. However, at a time when gender appears to be an ever growing preoccupation within education, it is important to refocus and ask how femininities are lived and regulated in the twenty-first century. Recent research suggest that contemporary gendered power relations are more complicated and contradictory (Kenway and Willis 1998; Blackmore 1999; Walkerdine et al. 2001). There is much to celebrate in both the emergence of new, strong, assertive femininities and the continuing pleasure and reward that the performance of femininity brings many women and girls. However researches point to a vast majority of boys, as well as a significant number of girls, still adhering to the view that it is preferable to be male than female (Reay, 2001). Higher education, associated with knowledge generation and production with active intellectual engagement fails to harness the immense potential of the female minds of the nation due to pressing social traditions and requirements of a stereotyped female figure who essentially serves as the sole nurturer and care giver first and then may opt for an intellectual venture. According to a British Council Commissioned report titled "Women in Higher Education Leadership in South Asia: Rejection, Refusal, Reluctance, Revisioning", the percentage of female teaching staff drops drastically at higher education. The report affirms – "Women constitute only 1.4% of the professoriate, though there are many at other positions like readers, lecturers etc". (February, 2015)

A historical perspective on femininity

Historically it has always been the case that masculinity is the preferred 'superior' subject positioning. In fact there is a long mainstream tradition which views female identity as 'non-identity'. Tselon (1995: 34) argues that this tradition, which pervades psychoanalytic, theological and social theory, defines femininity as an 'inessential social construction'. Thus in the theological discourse femininity is fake and duplicitous. In some psychoanalytic discourses femininity is masquerade and Doane (1988) argues, in such an assumption is implicit an understanding of femininity positing notion of woman's status as spectacle rather than spectator. But many psychoanalytic understandings, premised on the Freudian notion that the libido is male (Freud 1905) move beyond conceptions of femininity as spectacle into theorizations of femininity as a dissimulation of the female unconscious masculinity. It is argued that women's anxiety about retribution for challenging male power leads them to disguise themselves as objects of desire (Heath, 1989). Women can only equal men if they renounce all that is quintessentially female (Bloch, 1992). Thus as Tselon asserts, as the real 'woman' is a man, the feminine woman must be a masquerade. Or as Lacan (1977: 290) asserts: 'It is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that a woman will reject an essential part of femininity, namely, all her attributes in the masquerade. It is for that which she is not that she wishes to be desired as well as loved'.

Femininity is the process through which girls and women are gendered and become specific sorts of female. But, 'being and becoming, practising and doing femininity are very different things for women of different classes, races, ages and nations' (Skeggs 1997: 98). Femininity is always overlaid with other categorizations, generating understandings in which minority ethnic women and working-class women of all ethnicities are often positioned against normative

conceptions of femininity. Within an ideal of femininity as a sign they are perceived to be what femininity is not (Walkerdine 1990). Connell (1995) and Kenway and Willis (1998) argue that there are different formations of femininity. As Pyke (1996: 531) argues, 'hierarchies of social class, race and sexuality provide additional layers of complication. They form the structural and cultural contexts in which gender is enacted in everyday life, thereby fragmenting gender into multiple masculinities and femininities'.

Femininity is not a unified discourse, although dominant forms of femininity will usually be configured as rational and coherent; often as so obvious as to be taken for granted. For instance, it is generally believed that all women are naturally nurturant and caring. In contrast to such dominant understandings, femininity is dynamic, various and changing and it is perhaps helpful to think in terms of multiple femininities rather than one femininity. As Laurie et al. (1999) argue, this recognition of a multiplicity of femininities suggests that while dominant forms of femininity often draw on 'natural' and 'essential' associations between the biological sexed body and gender identities, these associations are not straightforward. Rather, we might consider sex and gender as dialectically interrelated (Butler 1993). Thus, while recognizing various forms of femininity, it is important to view them as constructs historically and contextually specific.

Context has always mattered in eliciting traits traditionally associated with being female (Epstein 1988; Rhodes 1992). It has been suggested that women are more often able to behave in supportive, caring ways at work because they are locked into low-paid, low-power jobs (Hansot and Tyack 1981). Such jobs, for example nursing and child care, rarely require competitive ways of operating. In contrast, studies of women in high-level management posts across the labour market report that they frequently adopted a career orientation more traditionally associated with men rather than women (Fogarty et al. 1972; Evetts 1990; Cox 1996; Schmuck 1996). Williams (1986) has written about the North American Berdache men who assume the tasks and roles of a woman and thus come to be seen within their native American culture as a third gender categorization, stressing how the performance of gender influences the ways in which it is symbolically constructed. The point being that when girls and women take up specific roles and bring gender identity and behaviour to bear, there is no simple, essential playing out of fixed gender behaviour and relations but rather a process of accommodation and mutual acceptance. However, the conventional position is rooted in binaries which mitigate against seeing how both changes in roles and performativity result in new evolving gender identities which transgress normative gender divisions. Femininities are best understood as being in process, constantly being made and remade in different times and places. They are always highly variable and changeable. Class, 'race', age and sexuality never mediate gender in formulaic or predictable ways. These social structures implicate 'race' and racism in the construction of minority ethnic femininities.

Femininities in education

Helen Wilkinson (1999: 37) argues that male and female values are converging, leading to the emergence of 'a masculinized new woman' at ease with male attributes and 'enjoying the buzz that comes with ambition, drive and success'. There have been significant shifts in the construction of femininity over the past few decades; shifts which have opened up and extended generally held understandings of acceptable female behaviour in both public and private spheres. The 1990s saw the 'post-feminist' assertion of 'girl power' and the notion of an active,

powerful femininity which is sexually assertive (Walkerline et al. 2001). There has been a welcome expansion of femininity to encompass previously excluded attitudes and practices. But scholars tend to both over-exaggerate the changes and to play down the costs in the enthusiasm about the benefits. Such changes have had a differential impact on the basis of social class, ethnicity, sexuality and age, and the new 'super girls' and 'super women' celebrated in the media often pay a price for their success. As Coppock et al. (1995) point out, the underlying realities are far more complicated, destabilizing notions that now 'women and girls can have it all'. It is these complexities and contradictions in relation to new forms of femininity that influence female pupils and women teachers.

The fluidity of contemporary femininity is evident in education. Lisa Adkins (1995: 8), writing about femininity in relation to the labour market, argues:

Those who are concerned with femininity do not assume [...] that femininity pertains only to women. Hence it is not assumed that the aesthetics of femininity concerns only women workers. Rather, the issue to be explored is the ways in which in a range of jobs both women and men are increasingly performing the aesthetics of femininity.

Within educational contexts, with their growing emphasis on measured outputs, competition and entrepreneurship, powerful associations of cleverness with asexuality (Willis 1977) and unfemininity (Walkerline 1989) still abound. Middle-class girls are caught up in a delicate balancing act in relation to femininity and cleverness in which being feminine cannot be allowed to interfere with academic success. The fusion of middle-class femininity with the academic rigour requires a huge investment in which femininity has to be struggled over and sexuality sometimes renounced. Indeed, academic success is produced out of the suppression of aspects of femininity and sexuality - a suppression which can generate intense identity crises. Recent research on female students attending secondary schools and further education colleges has stressed the link between class and femininity - specifically the ways in which young, working-class women are positioned in relation to discourses about 'appropriate' femininity and sexuality (Sharpe 1976; Lees 1993; Skeggs 1997). Claire Dwyer (1999) reported similar findings among the Muslim female students she interviewed. For these young Asian women, discourses of 'appropriate' femininity were crucially bound up with maintaining respectability and avoiding being labelled as someone who is sexually suspect. The 'emphasized' femininity that McRobbie (1978) found among adolescent working-class girls in the 1970s was still evident in the late 1990s, accommodating the interests and enhancing the status of boys in the class. But alongside such compliant forms of femininity were other forms that were more resistant and empowering for girls. Even so, while peer group discourses constructed girls as harder working, more mature and more socially skilled, still the boys and a significant number of the girls adhered to the view that it is better being a boy, suggesting that both girls and boys were still learning many of the old lessons of gender relations which work against gender equity.

Paul Connolly (1998) points out that girls' assertive or disruptive behaviour tends to be interpreted more negatively than similar behaviour in boys, while Robin Lakoff (1975) has described how, when little girls 'talk rough' like the boys do, they will normally be ostracized, scolded or made fun of. The tendency Clarricoates found in 1978 for girls' misbehaviour to be looked upon as a character defect, while boys' misbehaviour is viewed as a desire to assert themselves, was just as evident in teachers' discourses more than 20 years later.

In her study of children in multiracial, mixed social class primary schools, Becky Francis (1998) found that girls constructed a femininity for themselves as selfless and sensible in opposition to the boys' selfish and silly masculinity. Her more recent research (2000a) with secondary-school pupils found that a dominant construction of femininity as sensible and masculinity as silly and selfish was just as evident in secondary-school classrooms, although the sensible/silly construction had been reconfigured as maturity/immaturity. The backdrop to the manifestation of male power in the classroom, and its discursive reinforcement, lies beyond the classroom.

Women teachers across all sectors of schooling are caught up in dominant discursive constructions of the woman teacher as caring and nurturant. That is why traditionally more women secondary teachers than men have been associated with pastoral aspects of the secondary curriculum. However, such discursive constructions have impacted far more powerfully on women primary schoolteachers. Just as the ideal mother embodies all the characteristics of nurturant femininity, so does the ideal female primary schoolteacher. Walkerline's (1990) thesis is that the capacity for nurturance which historically has come to be seen as grounded in a naturalized femininity has been taken as the basis for women's fitness for the facilitation of knowing and the reproduction of the knower. However this passive role, while supportive of the production of knowledge, is positioned as the opposite of it. As Walkerline (1990: 137) concludes, 'the production of knowledge is thereby separated from its reproduction and split along a sexual division which renders production and reproduction the natural capacities of the respective sexes'. So the female primary schoolteacher becomes the means through which rational development can occur, a facilitator rather than a producer of knowledge. This discursive construction has had consequences for the ways in which female academics are viewed; consequences which both constrict and stereotype.

The dominant construction of female teachers, particularly in the primary sector, remains one of 'the surrogate mother'. Yet, within the contemporary educational market-place across all sectors of education an increasing number of women are achieving senior management positions and moving into contexts where traditional nurturant femininity is at odds with the demands of their posts. It is important to look at how their femininity is being reconfigured within educational markets which valorize classic male qualities of competition and individualism.

Connell (1995) argues that both men and women are capable of expressing attitudes and behaviours currently labelled 'masculine' or 'feminine', while Becky Francis (2000a) reasons that 'if the terms [masculinity] and [femininity] cannot be applied to both sexes, the inference is that gendered behaviour is indeed tied essentially to sex' (p. 17). Educational management is commonly conceptualized as 'masculine', concerned with 'male' qualities of rationality and instrumentality (Blackmore 1993; Blackmore and Kenway 1993). This would suggest that women (as well as men) promoted to senior management positions within the field of education will aspire to ways of managing which draw on styles widely perceived to be masculine rather than feminine. Judi Marshall (1984: 19) asserts that 'leadership characteristics and the masculine sex role correspond so closely that they are simply different labels for the same concept'. Morrison (1987) found that the psychological profiles of women who succeed in positions of executive leadership may be more like those of their male counterparts than they are like those of women in general, while Schein (1973; 1975) found that female senior managers were often 'more like men than men themselves'. Meta Kruger (1996) found in her study of 98 paired male and female headteachers in Holland that women were no different from their male counterparts in terms of 'internal communication' and 'personnel management'. She also researched whether women were 'more involved with others and less task orientated than men' and found that they were not, concluding that 'Women heads hardly differ from their male colleagues in the way in which they experience power' (p. 454). However, this is not to suggest that promotion into senior management is an easy process for women teachers. Rather, in relation to femininity, these women are caught up in a painful struggle of 'constant reinvention' (Walkerline et al. 2001).

Psychological studies such as those of Snodgrass would support the view that, as women achieve power, qualities normally associated with femininity are modified. Snodgrass found that women were not more sensitive than men overall when status was taken into consideration. Sensitivity varied according to status not sex, with lower status people being significantly more sensitive to the feelings of higher status people than vice versa (Snodgrass 1985; 1992). Contrary to such idealized depictions, Kanter (1977) has argued that many of the so-called gender differences in organizational behaviour stem directly from gendered differentials in opportunities and access to power. This would suggest that the acquisition of power within organizations results in women playing out their gendered identity in significantly different ways to those identities realized in normative, socially subordinate femininities. Indeed, female senior managers have to deal with, and act out, a number of contradictory and competing tendencies arising out of the conjunction of a gendered socialization which prepares women for relative powerlessness and a current occupational location invested with power. The negative psychic consequences of playing out a femininity that incorporates qualities traditionally viewed as masculine are just as evident in relation to women educational managers as they are in relation to clever schoolgirls. There is just as much conflict, unease and cost in women's performance of these 'new femininities' in the workplace as there is in schoolgirls' performance of 'new femininities' in the classroom. The major transformation that has taken place in educational organizations (i.e. the introduction of the market form) has had the effect of legitimating and encouraging assertive, instrumental and competitive behaviour rather than feminist or feminine ways of working.

As a consequence there remains an inherent paradox in women occupying the upper echelons of educational hierarchies, because such a positioning confounds and contradicts traditional notions of femininity. To be a successful professional near the top of an institutional hierarchy involves at the very least the performance of a markedly different femininity from that inscribed in traditional (or radical) notions of being female (see Tseelon 1995). Within a wider social context in which femininity continues to be denigrated while masculinity is still frequently elevated as manifesting a superior form of development (Archer 1989; Nicholson 1996), the inherent tension between being female and being a leader invariably results in adaptations and adjustments and the assumption of a femininity that is more congruent with leadership than traditional variants of femininity which are grounded in positions of relative powerlessness. Femininity for most women is lived out through paradox in which they are 'simultaneously socially invisible while being physically and psychologically visible, an object of the gaze' (Tseelon 1995: 54). As social visibility is intrinsic to leadership, women in leadership positions inevitably have to develop practices associated with masculinity in order to be seen as authentic leaders. Arguably, career success may be seen as part of a distancing process from normative femininity. Worring about the child or family members while at work, for instance is perceived as categorically feminine and hence anti-professional, while not doing so leads to a facile branding of professionally efficient women as "careerist" and hence severely ostracized from family and subject to societal censure. Academic career, previously viewed as suitable for women for its so called relaxed conditions assumed women in the reproducer of knowledge rather than producers, while modern norms and conditions, especially in higher education, emphasize

ing research output and active role in knowledge generation creates tremendous stress. Contemporary Indian higher education sector has scant scope of providing facilities that can enable a female academician to attend to her academic work load in tandem with research work and corporate life with complete mental calm resulting from minimal interference from family related issues. Motherhood especially is perceived as a block and modern Indian higher education settings provide least environmental and infrastructural support to provide the necessary mental peace that a bright female academician needs for quality output in terms of teaching, preparation, academic leadership and research. Traditional concept of femininity as the sole responsible entity for care giving and nurturing and a human desire for motherly love and care thus is forced to stand at cross roads with academic brilliance and performance. A woman is made to choose as opposed to her male counterpart. Administration and policy makers refuse to perceive the additional facilities related to the working environment in our nation for the full-realization of the potential of a female academician.

Conclusion

'Being a man' and 'being a woman' are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely.

(Butler 1993: 126–7)

In the twenty-first century, increasing numbers of girls and women are moving into intellectual and occupational spheres traditionally seen to be masculine. These changes involve the performance of new forms of femininity, a distancing from variants traditionally perceived as normative and the adoption of qualities previously viewed as masculine. In particular, middle-class girls and women today are involved in a repositioning and the construction of slightly different variants of femininity which allow the possibility of academic excellence within schooling and leadership. They have been more adept than their male peers at assuming the 'gender multiculturalism' which Connell (1995) argues opens up and broadens the possibilities of gender. All this is leading to a positive reconfiguration in which understandings of normative femininity are slowly shifting to include previously excluded behaviours, attitudes and possibilities. Yet this new reinvented femininity is just as regulated as previous forms of femininity. Girls and women are clearly paying a price for their success, as women develop illnesses of stress previously only seen in men, and eating and other obsessive-compulsive disorders continue to grow among female students (Walkerdine et al. 2001). The downside of female 'success' is apparent in the double and sometimes triple shift of many female academicians juggling work, child care and further study, while younger female students are caught up in a different juggling act between high academic achievements and positioning themselves as attractive and desirable to male peers and prospective suitors and families. They are often marginalized and excluded. It is high time that policy perspectives are rendered more inclined towards the burning problem in the education sector, especially higher education, where many bright academicians with great potential are dropping out due to gender expectations and roles assigned by the social and resultant family constructs.

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